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This, Ha, Is Called, Ha, 'Security.' Ha. (Sigh)

By Anonymous

In February 1978, William P. Kampiles sold to the Russians a secret report from a Central Intelligence Agency file to which he had access from March to November 1977. As a result, they know technical details of our most advanced satellite-reconnaissance system, the KH-11, and what sort of camouflage is needed to defeat it. Mr. Kampiles was convicted, in November 1978, but how many other secrets leak out without our knowledge no one knows.

The Government could test its own security system by sending agents to act as spies who would attempt to steal our secrets. By competing with real spies, they could identify weaknesses and estimate losses. But this is not done, so we can only guess.

As a defense contractor, I believe that there are far more leaks than officials care to admit.

We have an abundance of procedures, regulations, inspectors, record-keepers, vaults, safes, burglar alarms and cryptographic equipment. But the weak link is human attitude — ordinary citizens turned apathetic. The system has worn them down, and besides most have never seen a Russian agent. The threat seems remote.

The following conversation occurs frequently in the defense community with only minor variations:

"Are you cleared for secret?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Good, then let me tell you about..."

Superficially, the initial question is absurd since any spy would give the same expected response. Yet the question is asked with a straight face. The paradox is resolved by decoding a hidden meaning:

"I haven't seen your clearance, but I'm sure you're okay. You won't squeal on me if I tell something secret, will you?"

"Of course not! Go ahead."

"Good, then let me tell you about..."

These lax attitudes result from a process that we shall follow here in the case of Tom, a fictitious composite of engineers I have known.

He starts his career as a model member of the defense industry, proud to serve his country. As his first assignment, Tom attends a secret conference concerning a new weapon system. As it ends, he dutifully turns in his secret notes to the security officer, who will forward them by classified mail. But the notes arrive three weeks late, the printed proceedings are two months late, and Tom's boss is upset. Tom resolves that next time he will take contraband notes coded a bit to save his own conscience.

For a couple of years, the annoyances are minor. Tom can neither take work home nor discuss it by telephone. Sometimes he must lock his work in a safe merely to go to the men's room. But then Tom loses an argument with his Government client, Dick, who forces him to classify a report and severely limits its distribution.

Tom is proud of the report and wants to distribute it widely. It makes no reference to military hardware, neither existing nor planned, and consists mainly of advanced mathematics. Tom is upset because he knows Dick's ulterior motive: He does not want Harry to know about it. Harry works in another Government agency with which Dick's agency has a dispute over jurisdiction.

The next year, Tom goes to Washington to give an important presentation. Competing contractors participate in the same meeting.

Tom forwards secret visual aids to the Washington office: diagrams and photographs of equipment his group has built. But again, the classified mail is late, and he is forced to improvise with sketches. These look cheap compared to the attractive materials the competitors display.

Then Tom notices something: Two contractors present secret data on slides that are not marked "secret." Nobody seems to notice.

The security officer has no technical background and does not know which data are secret. The Government engineers know but have no interest in such details. Did these contractors carry unmarked secret slides in their briefcases? Only they know.

Tom has one final lesson. His project lapses for 16 months during a Federal budget quarrel.

During this lapse, a new security officer destroys all the reports, notes and working papers. The rules allow contractors to keep secret papers for inactive projects, but arrangements are required. The new officer had inquired properly but his questions were misrouted and Tom was never consulted.

Today Tom's attitude is "mature." His files contain many contraband copies of secret reports. Each page shows a faint trace top and bottom where he covered the words "secret" as he photographed the page. The files are locked, but the key is in a nearby potted plant. The safe combination with digits reversed is in his address book under "Kilroy."

However, Tom still has a conscience. He reversed all the numbers in one sensitive report. He removed figures and tables from another and filed them under "personal health insurance."

Even though Tom is more careless than most, he is still a good citizen working hard for national defense.

Another engineer in his division obeys regulations to the letter, but he is a phony. He displays security zeal like a halo to cover his technical incompetence.

The author of this article requested anonymity to maintain his "good standing" in the security community.